

MACBA Collection: Beneath the Surface, Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, Barcelona

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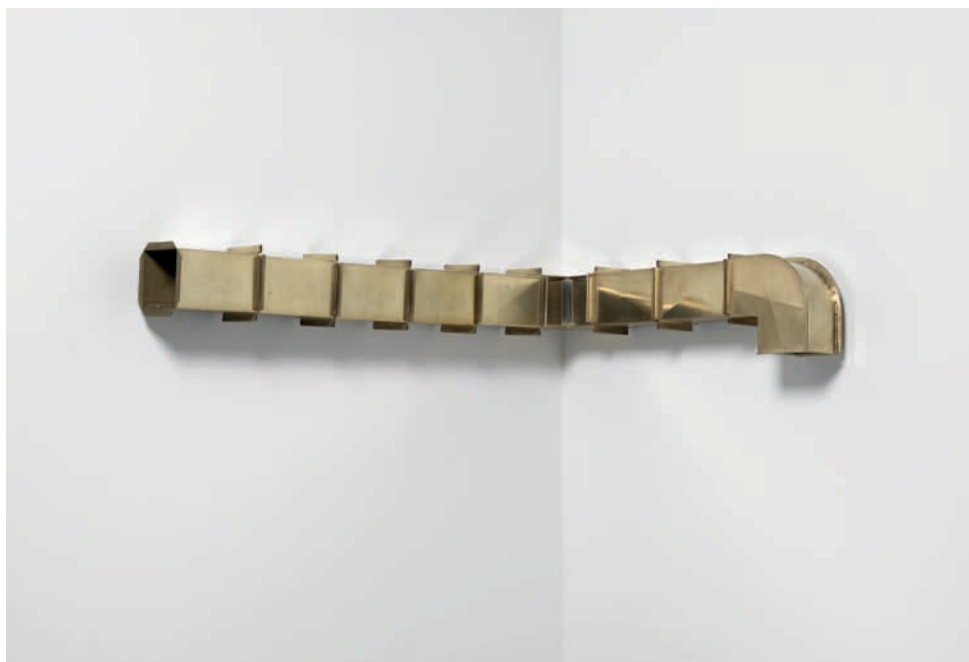
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Rita McBride

← *Servants and Slaves (Domestic)*, 2003.
Photo : © Rita McBride, courtesy of MACBA, Barcelona

Doris Salcedo

↑ *Atrabiliarios*, 1993.
Photo : © Doris Salcedo, courtesy of MACBA, Barcelona

Sigalit Landau

→ *Ángel; Nir*, 2014.
Photos : La Fotográfica, © Sigalit Landau, courtesy of MACBA, Barcelona

MACBA Collection: *Beneath the Surface*

The curatorial ethos at the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA) is unapologetically critical and does not condescend to its visitors. Instead, curators organize tight, well-researched, small temporary exhibitions that are housed in the stark, white cylindrical building designed by Richard Meier in 1990. When I visited in September 2018 there were four exhibits on display. *MACBA Collection: Beneath the Surface* was a standout because of its inclusion of works from the contemporary canon by Colombian artist Doris Salcedo, Cuban-born Felix Gonzales-Torres (1957–1996), and Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008), which were juxtaposed against works by a later generation of lesser-known artists, many of them women. These younger female artists are creating thought-provoking works, drawing on both post-minimalist and political sensibilities.

Beneath the Surface, curated by Antònia Maria Perelló, considered not just the surface, but also the depth of art objects, materially and ideologically. The curator selected an eclectic group of works that all, in their own way, explode the notion of what a painting or sculpture should look like. Put another way, the objects in the exhibit force us to think about how we look at paintings and sculptures. The exhibition was not pure formal experimentation, however. Indeed, almost every work was informed by some kind of political intention, whether it be to raise awareness of the disappeared in Colombia (Salcedo), to consider the transience of life in the time of AIDS (Gonzalez-Torres's light bulb installations from the early 1990s), or to unveil the lived realities of refugees in urban spaces (Sigalit Landau). There were well-chosen quotations from each artist on the gallery walls, usually short, but always illuminating of a politically- and critically-engaged artist.

The curator notes in the brochure and at the outset of the exhibition that a large number of the works on display explore post-minimalist practices. The minimalist movement,

theorized in 1965 by Donald Judd and Robert Morris, among others, has now been thoroughly critiqued as a largely masculine (or macho) movement. In 1966, Lucy Lippard set out to problematize minimalism and build upon it with her important New York exhibition *Eccentric Abstraction*, which included the work of Louise Bourgeois, Eva Hesse, and Yayoi Kusama, artists who employed a range of unexpected materials, exploiting the potentiality of those materials to offer an alternative expressive language to the stripped-down sculptural language of minimalism. Bourgeois, for instance, employed plaster, latex, and fabric in sculptural works that suggested abstract, often gendered, body parts.

One could argue that *Beneath the Surface* is an heir to *Eccentric Abstraction* in more ways than one. First, because the artists included in the exhibition are using their materials in exciting and challenging ways that literally and symbolically transcend the minimalism of the 1960s, and second, the exhibition is bursting with female artists who declare their presence with vibrant, critical, and moving artworks—although the artists of *Beneath the Surface* are more explicitly concerned with the psychic and material violence enacted upon humans in a range of global contexts.

In one of the early rooms, Doris Salcedo's *Atrabiliarios* [1], [2] and [3] (1993) invites the viewer to stand in contemplation before three rectangular holes cut in the gallery wall. In each hole there are shoes placed upright against the wall so that the open parts of the shoes face the viewer. The shoes once belonged to people in Colombia who have disappeared. Each hole in the wall is covered by a semi-translucent parchment, obstructing our visual access to the shoes. Parchment is made from animal skin, and Salcedo's use of this material to simultaneously protect, reveal, and conceal leads us to think about the victims, and the vulnerability of their skin and bodies. The title of the work is an old Castilian word



meaning melancholia or mourning. Quiet and exacting, *Atrabiliarios* testifies “to forms of violence and domination,” according to the didactic label. One of the best known series of Salcedo’s early work, the inclusion of *Atrabiliarios* whets the appetite, leaving us wanting more of her beautiful and affectively-challenging work.

In the large central room there were a number of industrial-looking artworks, all by women artists concerned with what the curator called the idea of the “city as skin.” A showstopper in this room was American artist Rita McBride’s sculptural installation *Servants and Slaves (Domestic)* (2003), comprised of metal structures related to urban, domestic spaces that were transformed from their expected proportions and colours. These are feminist sculptures that are both beautiful and political. McBride is preoccupied with sites of labour, such as the kitchen, garage, and draining systems. My only quibble with her title is the use of the term “slave,” which connotes a specific historical system of oppression that does not fit with the contemporary context of her work.

Israeli artist Sigalit Landau’s sculptures made out of used pipework were presented in close proximity to McBride’s work. Landau is concerned with the living conditions of disadvantaged groups of people in Israel, and I suggest that her works unveil the spectre of bodily waste as taboo. Anthropologist Mary Douglas describes dirt as “matter out of place,” and though there is no dirt visible here, the work forces us to consider those individuals who are deemed “out of place” and thus more vulnerable to violence. These intersecting themes of violence and vulnerability run throughout the exhibition.

In the brief brochure for *Beneath the Surface*, the curator quotes poet Paul Valéry, who wrote in 1932: “The deepest part of the human being is the skin.” The works in the MACBA’s exhibition do indeed go beneath the surface; they get under

your skin and stay in your mind. Although none of the works explicitly represent the human body, Salcedo’s shoes, Gonzalez-Torres’s single string of light bulbs, and Landau’s pipes, among other pieces, force us, or perhaps help us, to think about the vulnerability of human beings in a range of global contexts.

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